



Regional agencies are a hub for teacher learning

BY NICOLE N. WASKIE-LAURA

High-quality professional learning guided by Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning provides educators with the opportunity to develop and hone their discipline-specific expertise (Learning Forward,

2022) through collaboration, active learning, and sustained opportunities for feedback, expert support, and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

But districts may have limited internal capacity to provide teachers with sustained, systemic professional

learning that is relevant to every teacher due to a lack of funding, inadequate staffing, insufficient time, and competing demands. Educational service agencies, which work at the regional level to support multiple districts, can address those constraints and provide cooperative, consolidated



services with access to specialized knowledge that may be lacking in a single school.

In a recent case study, I explored the role of educational service agencies as professional learning providers, highlighting a community for special education teachers facilitated by an educational service agency in which members from 10 different districts gathered in a combination of virtual and in-person meetings over the course of a school year. As participating teachers reflected on how their involvement influenced their practice, they noted the value of collaboration, networking, and access to expertise.

The study showed that this structure enabled professional learning that is aligned to the standards and that reached and connected educators across districts. At the same time, the study showed how a lack of collaboration between educational service agencies and district administrators can limit the translation of new learning into classroom practice and highlights important action steps for agencies and districts to take together.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES

When I began my career as a professional learning specialist at a regional educational service agency a decade ago, I had no idea what the

agencies really did. My understanding was minimal at best, limited to their cooperative services for students with special needs and career and technical education.

In the years since, I have not only broadened my own knowledge about how educational service agencies support all aspects of the educational system, but I have also realized that my prior lack of understanding is reflective of a widespread pattern. In their book *The Educational Service Agency: American Education's Invisible Partner*, Stephens and Keene (2005) categorize educational service agencies as a major, but hidden, force in the improvement of teaching and learning in American schools.

Behind the scenes, these agencies are quietly impacting the quality of educational programs by developing teacher expertise, supporting access to specialized programs, and enabling strategic, efficient uses of time and money.

In 2021, the Association of Educational Service Agencies reported that there are over 553 service agencies operating in 45 states. These agencies are known by different names: boards of cooperative educational services, cooperative educational service agencies, county offices of education, educational consortiums or cooperatives, educational resource centers,

educational service units, intermediate units, and regional offices of education.

No matter what they are called, educational service agencies provide shared services to school districts in a specific geographic region with the aim of supporting a high-quality education system (Association of Educational Service Agencies, 2021).

Educational service agencies play an essential role in professional learning, especially for schools that are isolated geographically and teachers who are isolated in their specific subjects. Teachers in arts, special education, foreign language, and other unique subject areas are often the sole teacher of that subject in their buildings or districts.

Teachers in specialized roles have their own content-area standards and practices, as articulated in the Professional Expertise standard of Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). However, it can be difficult to offer the range of subject-area knowledge and expert support needed to promote growth for all teachers within the bounds of a single district.

Although districts may address the challenge of limited internal content expertise through interdisciplinary or vertical teams (Hansen, 2015), this discounts the collegiality and specificity that is gained from continuous,

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collaborative learning among teachers in the same specialized role and grade level.

By developing regional learning communities led by specialists with subject-specific expertise, educational service agencies can serve as a hub for these teachers. The combination of centralized content knowledge, effective professional learning design, and the spirit of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) enables substantial, responsive professional learning that honors and develops teacher practice and skill.

Educational service agencies also enable access to external providers — for example, from businesses, community agencies, government entities, and higher education (Stevens & Keane, 2005). Corbisiero-Drakos et al. (2021) recently highlighted an example in which a local educational service agency served as a multiagency hub, connecting cultural organizations and high-poverty districts. By mobilizing the agency’s collective resources, this partnership provided student field trips, supported in-district artist residencies, and facilitated artist-teacher collaborations.

BENEFITS OF NETWORKS

In 2021, I conducted a qualitative case study on the educational service agency where I currently work, Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), which serves school districts in a region of upstate New York close to the Pennsylvania border. Broome-Tioga BOCES is home to a professional learning team that facilitates over 30 regional learning communities for a wide range of subjects, from physics to physical education, world language to library media, computer science to family and consumer science.

In these communities, teachers from over 15 school districts discuss successful practices and common challenges, consider current educational research, prioritize content-area standards, analyze regional data, and share resources and strategies.

This case study revealed how a regional group can be a powerful mechanism for teachers to create professional networks and access role-specific professional learning.

In this case study, I focused on a newly formed regional community for special education teachers. My study was guided by two research questions: How do teachers translate and implement their learning from an educational service agency-facilitated learning community in their individual districts and schools? How do participants make sense of their identity as members of a regional group and within their districts?

Using a combination of observations, interviews, and document analysis (e.g., written participant reflections and workshop materials), I was able to glean comprehensive insight into how teachers navigate and negotiate identity and practice between external professional learning experiences and the contexts of their home districts.

This case study revealed how a regional group can be a powerful mechanism for teachers to create professional networks and access role-specific professional learning. First, through previously inaccessible connections with other educators from the same teaching context, the regional group validated current practices, provided fresh insights and perspectives, and encouraged joint problem-solving.

During sessions, members of the group identified common challenges, discussed effective instructional strategies and co-teaching practices, explored emerging educational technology tools, and collaboratively created resources. For example, during one session, small groups engaged in a jigsaw strategy to read and discuss an article about Universal Design for Learning principles, then applied these strategies to modify an existing lesson plan.

Second, an unexpected benefit of the regional group was the opportunity for participants to connect with their own district colleagues. Across multiple districts, teachers said that they did not have access to collaborative time specific for special education teams. District structures (schedules, start/end times, geographic distance) did not allow for regular vertical conversations to occur. In fact, several members of this regional learning community met their district colleagues for the first time at the regional sessions, resulting in new collegial connections that could be leveraged in the future.

Third, facilitators were key to achieving the positive connections and increased knowledge described above. The facilitators in this group played a significant role in supporting participants’ productive discussions, implementation of learning, and access to the most current information in the field through their intentional professional learning design.

Each session was grounded in high-leverage practices for special education (Council for Exceptional Children, 2022) and structured around paired, small-group, and whole-group activities. Each session ended with a commitment to try one new thing, then each subsequent session began with reflection regarding how it went (Waskie-Laura, 2022).

Facilitators supported the deliberate, systemic change outlined by the Implementation and Learning Design standards (Learning Forward, 2022) by intentionally structuring opportunities for members to consider their current practice, explore new approaches, and engage in iterative cycles of application and reflection with their peers.

CONNECTING TO DISTRICT GOALS

The study also illuminated challenges that must be addressed to ensure a positive influence of learning on teacher practice. For educational service agency-provided professional

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR DISTRICTS AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCIES

These reflection questions build off Barnett et al.'s (2010) typology of partnerships, Learning Forward's Action Guides and Standards for Professional Learning, elements of effective professional learning, and the lessons learned from both the case study and my ongoing work as a professional learning specialist.

Questions for educational service agencies:

- What are the targeted outcomes for this professional learning experience?
- How will we communicate these outcomes to participants and district or school leaders?
- What data have we consulted while planning (e.g., needs assessments, regional and statewide data)?
- How will we support participants and leaders with implementation and continuous learning (e.g., coaching, multiple sessions, check-ins)?
- How will we assess the effectiveness of our professional learning?

Questions for district and central office leaders and staff:

- How does this professional learning opportunity align with our district goals and needs?
- What support will we offer to sustain learning and support implementation for teachers (both internally and in partnership with external facilitators)?
- How will we provide timely and meaningful feedback to teachers as they implement their learning?
- What internal structures do we have in place, or might we need to put in place, to facilitate collegial sharing?
- How will we assess the effectiveness of this professional learning?

learning to be effective, corresponding district structures need to support enactment in-district. In this case, that connection was not strong enough to lead to changes in practice.

While the facilitators encouraged application and reflection, participants were limited by lack of administrator support, resistance from general education counterparts, and limited opportunities to distribute their knowledge. Participants felt responsible to navigate boundaries, advocate for support, and disseminate information all on their own. This led to frustration and inconsistent implementation.

For future efforts to be successful, there needs to be strong partnership from the beginning. Guskey (2014, 2016) emphasized the importance of backward design in planning for effective implementation. When we consider student outcomes, the new practices needed to achieve these outcomes, and the necessary organizational support for implementation, we can then pinpoint

the related educator knowledge and skills and the professional learning needed to attain them.

Correspondingly, we can gauge the impact of professional learning across similar levels. Although there is considerable complexity in translating teacher professional learning experiences into measurable student outcomes, beginning with the end in mind is essential to reaching this goal.

In educational service agency and school professional learning partnerships, this planning needs to be collective. As agency facilitators plan for the outcomes of the session, district and building leaders should also plan for application outcomes in the district. In the absence of this connection, professional learning by outside entities like educational service agencies can fall into the trap of one-and-done, which is ineffective at improving instructional practice (Darling Hammond et al., 2017).

Learning Forward's Action Guides and Innovation Configuration (IC) maps are a good resource for collective

planning and capacity building. (For more information, visit **standards.learningforward.org/action-guides**.) They clarify how external providers, principals, central office administrators, and coaches can meet Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

Considering the format and outcomes of a regional learning community through the lens of the IC maps by specific role provides a guide for how to effectively leverage educational service agency-provided professional learning to improve instruction.

In forging these partnerships, it is important to acknowledge that leaders and teachers from different districts bring a range of institutional cultures and systems to the collective table. This can at once promote expansion and create tension. For example, in the regional special education community, connecting with cross-district peers revealed regional differences regarding curriculum, scheduling, and structures for ongoing collaboration (or lack

thereof). These discussions offered insight into new possibilities while simultaneously generating discontent among members of the group.

Professional learning facilitators must skillfully steer these conversations toward productive outcomes within the group as well as with district leaders. As a corresponding action, educational service agencies might bring district leaders together in the same community structure, facilitating cross-district dialogue, idea exchanges, and collaboration.

The external provider IC map for the Implementation and Leadership standards emphasizes the importance of facilitators' contribution to ongoing planning, capacity building, and system-level change. By attending to both the regional professional learning context and district-level systems, regional facilitators can be a significant driver of instructional improvement.

For their part, school and district leaders should be clear about the goals and knowledgeable about the opportunities teachers are engaging in. Simply allowing teachers to participate in professional learning is not enough to shift practice on a systemwide scale. The goal of teachers' participation in regional professional learning should go beyond improving the practice of one or a few teachers toward strategic dissemination of individual learning with peers to spread the knowledge.

In many cases, administrators may want to be strategic, but competing priorities, a vast array of initiatives, and attending to day-to-day minutiae can hinder the available time and attention needed for effective implementation. The district/central office and principal IC map for Implementation point to distributed capacity and understanding of change management cycles as an essential piece of solving this puzzle. By engaging stakeholders across the organization, as well as leaning on partnerships with educational service agency facilitators, district leaders don't have to go it alone.

ENSURING EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Educational service agency professional learning facilitators and district leaders must work together as a team. Access to the specialized expertise, collaboration, and cost-effective resources provided by educational service agencies in conjunction with thoughtfully designed and implemented systems of in-district support creates opportunities for effective, equitable professional learning for all teachers.

Open communication, trust, and clarity of common goals are essential to the success of these partnerships (Buchanan et al., 2022; Stephens & Keane, 2005). By engaging in planning before, ongoing communication during, and reflective practice throughout, educational service agency facilitators, district and building leaders, and teacher participants can maximize the benefits of this professional learning approach. (See sidebar on p. 63 for reflection questions to help with planning and reflection.)

Combining access to specialized expertise and regional collaboration via an educational service agency with intentional district implementation planning can result in powerful learning for teachers, especially those in an isolated environment or subject area.

When educational service agencies and school districts join in partnership, the result is effective and efficient professional learning that multiplies capacity, transcends limitations, and results in improved instructional practice to advance learning for all.

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Nicole N. Waskie-Laura (nwaskiel@btbores.org) is director of professional learning and innovation at the Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in Binghamton, New York. ■